

CALL and less commonly taught languages: challenges and opportunities

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Abstract. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) researchers face many challenges in developing effective, high-quality CALL. CALL research has a very strong focus on the Most Commonly Taught Languages (MCTLs), particularly English. CALL researchers working with Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) face further constraints. LCTLs can range from languages with a large speaker and online presence to those with fewer speakers and less online resources. Suitable and effective pedagogical approaches may not be available for LCTLs and the learner needs may also be different. In the case of Endangered Languages (ELs) there are further constraints which include the lack of printed and online resources in the language, dialectal issues, lack of societal support, lack of quality language documentation, lack of an active speaker community or native speakers, competent linguists and teachers. This paper reviews general CALL constraints for MCTLs, the further constraints that particularly apply in the LCTL context and the additional constraints that exist for ELs. It suggests some strategies for dealing with these challenges, including leveraging prior research, reusing existing resources where possible, adopting a pragmatic approach and aiming to be smart with limited resources. CALL for LCTLs and ELs can look at what works for the MCTLs and try to leverage that.

Keywords: CALL challenges, CALL opportunities, less commonly taught languages, endangered languages.

1. Introduction

CALL researchers face many challenges in developing effective, high-quality CALL resources. The challenges include lack of real institutional support, difficulties in

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How to cite this article: Ward, M. (2015). CALL and less commonly taught languages: challenges and opportunities. In F. Helm, L. Bradley, M. Guarda, & S. Thoušny (Eds), *Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy* (pp. 549-552). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2015.000391>

ascertaining real learner needs, problems assembling a multidisciplinary team, financial limitations and time issues. Ideally the CALL multidisciplinary team would include language teachers, linguists, pedagogical specialists, learners, software engineers, programmers, and user interface designers, amongst others. Most CALL researchers do not have access to all of these people when designing and developing CALL resources. Language pedagogy is constantly evolving, as is CALL, and there is no 'silver bullet' or magic formula for developing the 'best' CALL resources. This makes the CALL process difficult, regardless of how many resources are available in the language.

2. Method

CALL research has a very strong focus on the MCTLs, particularly English. This is not surprising, given the global dominance of English as a major language of international business and communication. Although CALL researchers working with the MCTLs face challenges, CALL researchers working with LCTLs and ELs face further constraints.

2.1. CALL for less commonly taught languages

LCTL can range from Arabic, Japanese and Polish (who have a large speaker and online presence) to languages such as Bosnian and Bulgarian. While pedagogical strategies have developed over many years for the MCTLs, suitable and effective pedagogical approaches may not be available for LCTLs. Also, for CALL to be successful, it must address learner needs, but questions as to who are the learners, what is their motivation and previous language learning experiences, what their learning needs and goals are may not be clear and this can hamper CALL for LCTLs. It is easy to understand why many people study English. Apart from its global position, it may be compulsory in the education system. However, for LCTLs, there are often different motivations for learning the language, some of which are quite different from those studying English. Some language learners may wish to read literature in the original language, learn a language for heritage reasons, for a holiday visit or for military intelligence reasons. Clearly what they want to learn and how they want to learn will vary. It is also important to consider the age and context of the learners: are they children learning it because it is compulsory or adults learning it for intrinsic reasons? What previous language learning experience do they already have? Are they familiar with the writing system or the sound system? In CALL for Japanese, is it better to teach romaji first (i.e. use the roman alphabet) or use hiragana, katakana and kanji from the start? What CALL strategies should be adopted for teaching Basque? In general, there are also

less researchers working in CALL for these languages, so the pool of expertise may be limited. For these reasons, it is more challenging for CALL researchers working with LCTLs to design, develop and deploy CALL resources.

2.2. CALL for endangered languages

ELs, as the name suggests, are languages that are in danger of disappearing. There is a language endangerment scale from not endangered through to severely endangered and extinct. For example, in Italy, Venetian and Sicilian are classified as ‘vulnerable’, while Gardiol and Griko are both ‘severely endangered’ (Moseley, 2010). In the case of languages that are threatened or endangered there are further constraints which include the lack of printed and online resources in the language, dialectal issues, lack of societal support and in some cases lack of quality language documentation. For example, the language may not have a writing system or may never have been documented. There may be several dialects and choosing which one to teach can be socially and culturally problematic. Some EL communities may want to restrict access to who can learn the language. The issue of an active speaker community or indeed, access to native speakers and competent linguists and teachers can be a real problem for ELs. For example, for severely endangered languages, the few remaining speakers may be older adults with health difficulties who may live in a remote area and may not be willing or able to help. Obviously, these constraints make CALL for ELs very difficult.

3. Discussion

However, it is important to look for possible solutions to these constraints. In many situations, researchers are not aware of what has worked (and what has not worked) in the past. It is important that they have access to this information so that they can use their limited resources more effectively. For example, while CALL effectiveness research has room for improvement, there appears to be certain areas in which CALL can have a positive impact on learning; e.g. MALL (Burston, 2015) and computer assisted pronunciation training and chat (Golonka et al., 2014). CALL for LCTLs and ELs can look at what works for the MCLTs and try to leverage that. For CALL researchers working with ELs, it is informative to learn what has worked for other EL communities in different parts of the world. Although the context will vary, some of the lessons learnt could be useful for other (relatively less well resourced) communities in other parts of the world. For both EL and LCTL CALL researchers, a useful strategy is to reuse existing resources where possible. For example, Hot Potatoes authoring software provides a tool to enable the development of language learning exercises. While some may have

pedagogical doubts about such exercises, they do have a role to play in the language learning process, especially in situations where the learners do not have easy access to target language materials or speakers. Reusing an existing tool allows for more efficient use of CALL researchers' time so they can work on other aspects of the CALL environment. Another important strategy is to adopt a pragmatic approach. Perhaps the CALL resources are not the best or most beautiful and may not adhere to the latest 'correct' way to teach a language, but it is better that they exist than to wait until the 'perfect' CALL resource for the language can be developed. This is especially true in the case of ELs, where time is of the essence and ability to access the remaining speakers may disappear in the near future. Overall, the aim should be to be smart with the limited resources available.

4. Conclusions

CALL development is difficult regardless of the target language. CALL provides an opportunity for learners of LCTLs and ELs to access learning resources and interact with other learners and speakers – something that otherwise would not be possible. Without CALL, it would be very difficult for learners of LCTLs and ELs to have access to learning materials, as it is often easier, cheaper and quicker to provide them electronically. In some/many cases, it may not be possible to print the relevant resources. Without CALL, it would be very difficult for learners of LCTLs and ELs to hear the language being spoken. For many of these learners, there may be no native speakers near them, or in the case of ELs, there may be very few speakers left in the world. While CALL can help learners of English and the other major world languages to learn the language and can foster social change, arguably CALL can have a bigger impact on LCTLs and ELs. It is more difficult for these languages, but CALL can help learners and the language communities more in these contexts than in the mainstream CALL situation. It is definitely worth the effort.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
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Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy
Edited by Francesca Helm, Linda Bradley, Marta Guarda, and Sylvie Thouéšny

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ISBN13: 978-1-908416-29-2 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-30-8 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

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Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2015.